The Mirror of Production

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II. MARXIST ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE DOMINATION OF NATURE

In the 18th century, the simultaneous emergence of labor as the source of wealth and needs as the finality of produced wealth is captured at the zenith of Enlightenment philosophy in the appearance of the concept of Nature, around which gravitates the entire rationality of the system of political economy.

As late as the 17th century, Nature signified only the totality of laws founding the world's intelligebility: the guarantee of an order where men and things could exchange their meanings [*significations*]. In the end, this is God (Spinoza's "*Deus sive natura*"). Subject and world already have respective positions (as they had since the great Judeo-Christian rupture, to which we will return), but not in the sense of a mastery or exploitation of Nature, or conversely as the exaltation of an original myth. The rule for the autonomous subject confronting Nature is to form his practice so as to achieve an equilibrium of significations.

All this is shattered in the 18th century with the rise and "discovery" of Nature as a potentiality of *powers* (no longer a totality of *laws*); as a primordial source of life and reality lost and recovered, repressed and liberated; and as a deed projected into an atemporal past and an ideal future. This rise is

only the obverse of an event: Nature's entry into the era of its technical domination. This is the definitive split between subject and Nature-object and their simultaneous submission to an operational finality. Nature appeared truly as an essence in all its glory but under the sign of the *principle of production*. This separation also involves the *principle of signification*. Under the objective stamp of Science, Technology, and Production, Nature becomes the great Signified, the great Referent. It is ideally charged with "reality"; it becomes *the* Reality, expressible by a process that is always somehow a process of labor, at once *transformation* and *transcription*. Its "reality" principle is this operational principle of an industrial structuration and a significative pattern.[1]

From the outset, this process rests on two separated terms whose separation, however, is complicitous: confronted by Nature "liberated" as a productive power, the individual finds himself "liberated" as labor power. Production subordinates Nature and the individual simultaneously as economic factors of production and as respective

1. This is why each product of labor will always be both a commodity and the *sign* of operable Nature and of its operation. In the framework of political economy, each product, besides its use value and exchange value, signifies and verifies the operationality of Nature and the "naturalness" of the process of production. This is why the commodity always has a value-sign, a coded value element. (It is not a question here of connotations of meaning that are grafted on during the stage of consumption. It is at the level of production itself that the commodity signifies, that it *represents* the principle of production and operationalization of Nature.) And, in the exchange of products, it is not only economic values but the code, this fundamental code, that circulates and is reproduced. Similarly, in the institution of labor power, man becomes not only economically operational but also the effect-referential of this operationality-sign.

terms of the same rationality—a transparency in which production is the mirror, directing articulation and expression in the form of a code.

For a long time, even in myth, production has been thought of in the mode of human reproduction. Marx himself spoke of labor as the father and the earth as the mother of produced wealth. This is false. In productive labor man does not make children with Nature. Labor is an objective transformation based on carving out and technically abstracting the subject and the object. Their relation is based only on the equivalence of the two terms as productive forces. What unifies them "dialectically" is the same abstract form.

Thus Nature gains force as ideal reference in terms of the very reality of its exploitation. Science presents itself as a project progressing toward an objective determined in advance by Nature. Science and Technology present themselves as revealing what is inscribed in Nature: not only its secrets but their deep purpose. Here the concept of Nature appears in all its ambiguity:

– It expresses only the finality of the domination of Nature inscribed in political economy. *Nature is the concept of a dominated essence* and nothing else. In this sense, it is Science and Technology that fulfill the essence of Nature by indefinitely reproducing it as separated.

– However, they do this in the name of a finality supposed to be Nature itself.

Hence the same concept operates in both cases: a factor of production and a model of finality; a servile, metaphorical instance of freedom; a detached, metaphorical instance of the totality. And it is by being sublimated and repressed that Nature becomes a metaphor of freedom and totality. Every-

thing that speaks in terms of totality (and-or "alienation") under the sign of a Nature or a recovered essence speaks in terms of repression and separation. Everything that invokes Nature invokes the domination of Nature.

The Moral Philosophy of the Enlightenment

All the major concepts (those worthy of a capital letter) depend on the same operation. The "People," for example, whose ideal reference emerges with the collapse of traditional community and the urban concentration of destructured masses. Marxist analysis unmasked the myth of the People and revealed what it ideally hides: wage earners and the class struggle. On the other hand, Marxism only partially dislocated the myth of Nature and the idealist anthropology it supports. Marx indeed "denaturalized" private property, the mechanisms of competition and the market, and the processes of labor and capital; but he failed to question the following naturalist propositions:

—the useful finality of products as a function of needs;

—the useful finality of nature as a function of its transformation by labor.

The functionality of Nature structured by labor, and the corresponding functionality of the subject structured around needs, belong to the anthropological sphere of use value described by Enlightenment rationality and defined for a whole civilization (which imposed it on others) by a certain kind of abstract, linear, irreversible finality: a certain model subsequently extended to all sectors of individual and social practice.

This operational finality is arbitrary in such a way that the concept of Nature it forgets resists inte-

gration within it. It looks as if forcefully rationalized Nature reemerges elsewhere in an irrational form. Without ceasing to be ideological, the concept splits into a "good" Nature that is dominated and rationalized (which acts as the ideal cultural reference) and a "bad" Nature that is hostile, menacing, catastrophic, or polluted. All bourgeois ideology divides between these two poles.

The same split occurs simultaneously at the level of man, through his idealist simplification as an element of the economic system. Starting with the 18th century, the idea of Man divides into a naturally good man (a projection of man sublimated as a productive force) and an instinctively evil man endowed with evil powers. The entire philosophical debate is organized around these sham alternatives, which result simply from the elevation of man to an economic abstraction. Marxism and all revolutionary perspectives are aligned on the optimist vision. They preserve the idea of an innate human rationality, a positive potentiality that must be liberated, even in the latest Freudo-Marxist version in which the unconscious itself is reinterpreted as "natural" wealth, a hidden positivity that will burst forth in the revolutionary act.

This dichotomy also occurs at the level of labor power. When exploited, labor power is good: it is within Nature and is normal. But, once liberated, it becomes menacing in the form of the proletariat. This contradiction is averted by assimilating the proletariat to a demonic, perverse, destructive Nature. Thus the dichotomy in the idea of Nature which expresses the profound separation in the economic order is admirably recuperated at the ideological level as a principle of moral order and social discrimination.

Fetishized for better or for worse, such is the true "alienation" of Nature and of the corresponding idea of Man. When at the same time he brands Nature and himself with the seal of production, man proscribes every relation of symbolic exchange between himself and Nature. It is this proscribed ambivalence that reemerges in the ambiguity of Nature and in man's own moral contradiction.

Marxism has not disencumbered itself of the moral philosophy of the Enlightenment. It has rejected its naive and sentimental side (Rousseau and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre), its cloying and fantastic religiosity (from the noble savage and the Age of Gold to the sorcerer's apprentice), but it holds onto the religion: the moralizing phantasm of a Nature to be conquered. By secularizing it in the economic concept of scarcity, Marxism keeps the idea of Necessity without transforming it. The idea of "natural Necessity" is only a *moral* idea dictated by political economy, the ethical and philosophical version of that bad Nature systematically connected with the arbitrary postulate of the economic. In the mirror of the economic, Nature looks at us with the eyes of necessity.

Marx says, "Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants: but, at the same time, the forces in production which satisfy these wants also increase."[2] What is not recognized here—and what allies Marx with the foundations of political economy—is that in

2. *Capital, op.cit.*, III, pp. 799-800.

his symbolic exchanges primitive man *does not guage himself in relation to Nature*. He is not aware of Necessity, a Law that takes effect only with the objectification of Nature. The Law takes its definitive form in capitalist political economy; moreover, it is only the philosophical expression of Scarcity. Scarcity, which itself arises in the market economy, is not a *given* dimension of the economy. Rather, it is what *produces and reproduces* economic exchange. In that regard it is different from primitive exchange, which knows nothing of this "Law of Nature" that pretends to be the ontological dimension of man.[3] Hence it is an extremely serious problem that Marxist thought retains these key concepts which depend on the metaphysics of the market economy in general and on modern capitalist ideology in particular. Not analyzed or unmasked (but exported to primitive society where they do not apply), these concepts mortgage all further analysis. The concept of production is never questioned; it will never radically overcome the influence of political economy. Even Marxism's transcending perspective will always be burdened by counter-dependence on political economy. Against Necessity it will oppose the mastery of Nature; against Scarcity it will oppose Abundance ("to each according to his needs") without ever resolving either the arbitrariness of these concepts or their idealist overdetermination by political economy.

The political order is at stake here. Can the quantitative development of productive forces lead to a revolution of social relations? Revolutionary hope is

3. Cf. Marshall Sahlins, "La première société d'abondance," *Les Temps Modernes* (October, 1968), pp. 641-680.

based "objectively" and hopelessly on this claim. Even for Marcuse in *The End of Utopia*, the due date of revolution is at hand given our technological potentials: quantitative change is possible as of now. Even when the situation has clearly drifted enormously far from revolution and the dominant social relations support the very development of productive forces in an endless spiral, this dialectical voluntarism, for which Necessity exists and must be conquered, is not shaken. Scarcity exists and must be abolished; the Productive Forces exist and must be liberated; the End exists and only the means need be found. All revolutionary hope is thus bound up in a Promethean myth of productive forces, but this myth is only the space time of political economy. And the desire to manipulate destiny through the development of productive forces plunges one into the space time of political economy. The wish to abolish scarcity is not furthered by restoring an integrated productivity. The *concept* of Scarcity itself, the concept of Necessity, and the concept of Production must be exploded because they rivet the bolt of political economy. No dialectic leads beyond political economy because it is the very movement of political economy that is dialectical.

Lycurgus and Castration

Parallel to the concepts of Necessity, Scarcity, and Need in the (vulgar or dialectical) materialist code, the psychoanalytic concepts of Law, Prohibition, and Repression are also rooted in the objectification of Nature.

Vernant cites the story of Lycurgus.[4] Lycurgus

4. *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs* (Paris: Maspero, 1966), p. 205.

kills his son Dryas or, in other versions, cuts off his foot believing he is trimming a vine. In another story, Phylacus makes his son impotent while trimming a tree or butchering livestock. Hence the violence against nature (the rupture of exchange with and symbolic obligation toward it) is immediately expiated. All the myths of a vengeful, bad, *castrating* nature take root here. And this is no mere metaphor, as the story clearly indicates. The rupture is immediately the foundation of *castration*, of the Oedipus complex (in this case parental, since the father emasculates the son), and of Law. For only then does Nature appear as an implacable necessity, "the alienation of man's own body." Marx adopted this Law of Necessity along with the Promethean and Faustian vision of its perpetual transcendence, just as psychoanalysis adopted the principle of castration and repression, prohibition and law (in the Lacanian version, by inscription in the order of the Signifier). But in no sense is it a fundamental structure. Neither Law nor Necessity exist at the level of reciprocity and symbolic exchange, where the break with nature that leads to the irreversibility of castration—and consequently to the entire becoming of history (the operational violence of man against nature) and of the unconscious (the redemption of the symbolic debt owed for this operational violence)—has not occurred. In this sense law, which is called the foundation of the symbolic order and of exchange, results instead from the rupture of exchange and the loss of the symbolic. This is why there is properly neither Necessity nor Scarcity nor Repression nor the Unconscious in the primitive order, whose entire symbolic strategy aims at exorcizing the apparition of Law.[5]

5. And the incest taboo? Already this all-powerful concept

Under the sign of Necessity and Law, the same fate—sublimation—awaits Marxism and psychoanalysis. We have seen how materialism's reference to "objective" Necessity led it to fantasize in its revolutionary perspectives the reverse schemes of Freedom and Abundance (the universality of needs and capacities) which are only the sublimated counterparts of Law and Necessity. Similarly, the analytic reference to the Unconscious, product of repression and prohibition, leads to the same step (today psychoanalysis is being short-circuited on a very large scale, and this turning away cannot be called accidental): an ideal reference to a "liberation" of the Unconscious and to its universalization by removing repression.[6] In this case as well, an ideal-revolutionary sublimation of a *content* results from accepting an essential *form* given as irreducible. But this form is merely the specific abstraction of an order that has cancelled symbolic relation in favor of operational violence, symbolic exchange in favor of

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has lost its legitimacy. Cf. Deleuze and Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie: L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), and also d'Oritgues, *L'Oedipe africain* (Paris: Plon, 1966), etc.

6. That is, to the universalization of a positivized libido and Eros that are "liberated" as value, by which revolutionaries rejoin all the culturalist neo-Freudians in an optimistic, moralizing vision. But the other, strictly Freudian perspective (normally connoting "pessimism") is based on the economic interpretation (the Nirvana principle and a resolution of tensions). Although this interpretation takes the problem of death into account, it contradicts all traditional humanism (idealist or revolutionary), resting instead on a conception of man in terms of instincts. This "materialist" vision is also moral and is secretly directed by Law, an instance of sublimation and repression, and hence the finality of a resolution of these instincts either in the transgression of this Law (the pleasure principle) or in repression (Nirvana principle). In neither case can a resolution of Law be envisioned.

the Law of castration and value—or, better, it has cancelled the actualization of the death impulse and the ambivalence in exchange in favor of a productive Eros split into a symbolic violence of the Unconscious.

Judaeo-Christian Anti-Physis

This separation from Nature under the sign of the principle of production is fully realized by the capitalist system of political economy, but obviously it does not emerge with political economy. The separation is rooted in the great Judaeo-Christian dissociation of the soul and Nature. God created man in his *image* and created Nature for man's *use*. The soul is the spiritual hinge by which man is God's image and is radically distinguished from the rest of Nature (and from his own body): "Uniquely in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever known. In absolute contrast to ancient paganism and oriental religions, Christianity not only institutes a dualism of Man and Nature but also affirms that God's will is that man exploit Nature according to his own ends."[7]

Rationality begins here. It is the end of paganism, animism and the "magical" immersion of man in nature, all of which is reinterpreted as superstition. ("Rational" Marxism makes the same error by reinterpreting it in terms of the "rudimentary" development of productive forces.) Hence although science, technology, and material production subsequently enter into contradiction with the cultural order and the dogmas of Christianity, nonetheless their condition of possibility remains the Christian postulate of man's transcendence of

7. *Science* (Paris), March, 1967.

nature. This is why a scientific movement does not emerge in Greece. Greek rationality remains based on a conformity with nature radically distinguished from the Christian rationality and "freedom" based on the separation of man and nature and on the domination of nature.

This separation immediately establishes not a work ethic (of material domination and production) but an ethic of asceticism, suffering, and self-mortification: an "other-worldly" ethic of sublimation, in Max Weber's expression. Not a productive morality but a fixed order is outlined, in which well-being is to be "earned." And this is an *individualist* enterprise. The passage from the ascetic to the productive mode, from mortification to labor, and from the finality of welfare to the secularized finality of needs (with the Puritan transition at the origin of capitalism where work and rational calculation still have an ascetic, intra-worldly character and an orientation toward well-being) changes nothing in the principle of separation and sublimation, repression and operational violence. Well-being and labor are both well within the realm of ends and means. From ascetic practices to productive practices (and from the latter to consumer practices) there is thus *desublimation*; but the desublimation is only a metamorphosis of repressive sublimation. The ethical dimension is secularized under the sign of the material domination of nature.

Christianity is thus on the hinge of a rupture of symbolic exchanges. The ideological form most appropriate to sustain the intensive rational exploitation of nature[8] takes form within Christian-

8. Yet it was repeatedly intersected by contradictory, heretical currents, which in their protest were always attached to

ity during a long transition: from the 13-14th century when work begins to be imposed as value, up to the 16th century when work is organized around its rational and continuous scheme of value—the capitalist productive enterprise and the system of political economy, that secular generalization of the Christian axiom about nature. But this revolution of the rational calculus of production which Weber noted is not the beginning; it is prefigured in the Christian rupture. Political economy is only a kind of actualization of this break.

Epistemology II:

Structural Limits of the Marxist Critique

The above discussion poses a serious methodological question (which will arise again later in the discussion of the Marxist interpretation of earlier societies). Basing the intelligibility of the contradictions of political economy on the structural givens of the finished system (capital), Marxist analysis cannot

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"naturism": a rehabilitation of nature, a beyond of Christianity most often expressed only by a nostalgia for the origins of Christianity. From St. Francis of Assisi with his Christ-like angelicism (all creatures praise God, etc.)—but St. Francis was a sort of fire fighter for the Catholic Church quenching the flames of the Cathar and pantheist heresies that threatened to engulf the whole Western world—to Spinoza with his subtle and impious pantheism (God is everywhere in Nature, thus he is nowhere) and all the Adamite sects that preached the refusal of labor and the resurrection of the body, and dreamt of abolishing the very finality of the Christian order (its principle of transcendence and sublimation) in their immediate demand for the end of the whole world and for "Paradise now." Against all these naturalist, pantheistic, mystical, libertarian and millenarian heresies, the Church always defended, along with the original break with nature, a morality of effort and merit, of labor and works, which was coupled with the evolution of the order of production and connected with the political dimension of power.

account for these basic coordinates of economic rationality—because the system of political economy tends to project itself retrospectively as a model and subordinates everything else to the genealogy of this model. When Marxism takes up its critique it does not question this retrospective finality. Thus in the strict sense, it analyzes only the conditions of the model's *reproduction*, of its production as such: of the separation that establishes it.[9] The analysis of the production of *the economic as finality and as universal principle of reality*, the analysis of the production of the *production principle*, escapes Marxism since it moves only within the structural field of production. By presupposing the axiom of the economic, the Marxist critique perhaps deciphers the *functioning* of the *system* of political economy; but at the same time it reproduces it as a model. By pretending to illuminate earlier societies in the light of the present structure of the capitalist economy, it fails to see that, abolishing their difference, it projects onto them the spectral light of political economy.

Marx affirmed that it is on the basis of a critical return to its own contradictions that (our) culture becomes capable of grasping earlier societies. Thus we must conclude—and thereby grasping the *relativity* of Marxist analysis—that in Marx's time

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9. Likewise, structural linguistics cannot account for the emergence of language as a *means of communication*: it can only analyze its functioning, and thus its reproduction, as such. But this destination of language, which linguistics takes as an axiom, is merely an extraordinary reduction of language (and hence of the "science" that analyzes it). And what operates in this "science," in the last instance, is the reproduction of this arbitrary model of language. Similarly, the structural analysis of capital only leads back to its principle of logical reality (in which "science" itself participates).

the system of political economy had not yet developed all its contradictions, hence that even for Marx radical critique was not yet possible nor was the real comprehension of earlier societies. Marx himself could not encroach on the system's total logic. Only at a certain stage of development and saturation of the system can critique go to its *roots*. In particular, the fundamental determinations of the economic (form production and form representation), the break they establish in relation to symbolic exchange, and the way a radical revolution of social relations is sketched starting from them can be read only after political economy has invaded all fields of social and individual practice, far beyond the field of material production. It is useless to question Marx about these matters. Analyzing one phase and only one phase of the general process, his critique goes only so far and can only be extrapolated regarding the remainder. Marxism is the projection of the class struggle and the mode of production onto all previous history; it is the vision of a future "freedom" based on the conscious domination of nature. These are extrapolations of the economic. To the degree that it is not *radical*, Marxist critique is led despite itself to reproduce the roots of the system of political economy.